

do you really want to hurt me by Lorata

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Summary: Eleven learns a new word to explain a very familiar feeling.

do you really want to hurt me

This one doesn't look like the other ones. Face, different. Others have more lines. Hair shiny and dark. Eyes empty, looking past you, somewhere else. Elsewhere, always elsewhere. Not at you. But this one — different face, smooth, not like Papa, not like others. This one's hair dark too, and shiny, but not short or tight. You don't know what it looks like, but not like others. This one's eyes, too, not as hard. Eyes that look at you, not elsewhere, not just charts and screens, but you. Really you.

You don't look back. Never look back. Eyes down, much better. Look at the table, look at your hands, trace the thin blue line of your veins running down from the knuckles. Push your finger on the vein, watch the blood stop, vein goes white and sits flat against the skin. Let go, blood flows back. Push, let go. Push, let go. Push, let go. Soon it will stop. They'll stop and you can go. Back to the room. Back to Papa.

Cold air, shirt feels strange pushed up to your shoulders. Lean forward, chin on table. You curl your feet around the legs of the chair, hook them tight and pull. It makes a bad feeling on the tops of your feet where they press into the metal, but it's a different bad than the bad in your back. Focus on the little bad and the big bad — well, doesn't go away, but. It shouts less loud.

This one touches your head, light touch, so quick you almost miss it. "Tell me if it hurts."

Don't look back, don't interrupt, don't make trouble — but. But. You're meant to learn. Papa says. Learn lots of things, the right things. "Tell me" is an order. Obey orders, Papa says. But what's hurt? Don't understand, can't obey. Simple.

"Hurt?" The word tastes strange, like licking metal.

Pause. "Yes, hurt, tell me if it hurts." Voice changed, not so light now. Angry, but not Papa angry. Not staring cold and quiet while you scream and kick and drop your weight. Not watching and getting smaller and smaller away down the hall. Not building slow and slow and quiet and then — BANG! — a fist on the table so hard the metal

dents.

Different. You don't know how. Angry is bad, angry means you failed. This angry is new, and new is bad too. New is before you learn, new means mistakes. Air sticks in your chest. You clench your hands until the nails bite your skin, and the little-bad brings you back, just enough. You shake your head, once, again, again, harder and harder until the world wiggles. You don't know. You can't complete the order. You've already failed.

"Hurt," this one says again. "It means —" This one pinches your arm, and there, when you gasp at the tiny burst of invisible fire that shoots through your skin, this one says, "There, that's hurt. Tell me if it hurts."

Hurt. Hurt for the pinch and hurt for the bite of nails into your palm and hurt for your feet digging into the legs of the chair. Hurt for your knuckles cracking against the wall of the dark room, hurt for biting your lip until your mouth tastes sharp and bad. You roll the word around and around and around. Hurt.

The needle bites your skin low on your back, and the flash goes up through your brain like always — but this time you know. "Hurt!" The word flies out and it feels free. Feels like digging fingers under the edge of a scab and pulling, pulling, pulling until it peels away. Feels like the shiny pink skin underneath, brand new. "Hurt, hurt, hurt —"

Screaming by the end, can't help it. This one stops, puts the needle away in the white box. Closes the lid. Tugs your shirt down. Hand on your head again, light. "Okay," this one says. "Okay, you were very brave."

Two new words in one day. Papa will be so pleased. "Brave?"

This one pauses again. Thinking. "You," this one says.

Not an answer, but you like it anyway. Brave feels like running around the track with the electrodes taped to your head and chest and arms and legs, running and running with the burning in your lungs, leg muscles shaking. Like almost falling, almost giving up but

you run a little more and then you can run a lot more and everything is light and faraway.

You try this word, too. "Brave."

This one's eyes go tight, mouth a thin thin line. Angry again — your heart thump-thumps, mouth dry — but no, no. Elsewhere-angry. Angry at elsewhere. This one takes you back to your room, quiet down the long, empty hallway. At the door you move your head, turn it a little toward this one, just to see. This one's hand brushes your scalp, runs once over the bristles of your hair.

"No," you tell Papa the next day. "Hurt."

Papa stares and stares and stares. Others stop, needle held tight in bright blue fingers. "What did you say?"

Danger, this time, low and quiet and elsewhere but coming here. You curl your fingers, focus on the tiny little hurts in your palm. "Hurt?"

Papa leans down close. Hand heavy on your shoulder, steady. No running now. "Where did you hear that?"

Tomorrow no more this one, only others. Later new ones are not this one, just new others, shiny hair and hard eyes and hands. Lots of hurt, no more light touches on your head. You don't ask about this one. Not the right kind of question.

Papa explains about hurt, later. "It's important. Important things often hurt, you know, but that doesn't mean we stop trying. In fact, sometimes the more things hurt, the more important they are. What you're doing is very important. You're very special, and even if it hurts, what you're doing matters more. Do you understand?"

Raise chin, lower chin. Papa's hand on your shoulder again, warm and strong. "Good girl."

(You know good. You like good. You want to be good forever, and so you don't tell him about brave. Brave is yours, yours to keep in the

dark when you pull your arms around yourself and squeeze. Yours when the needles hurt and the machines hurt and the hands hurt and your mind hurts. Yours when the door closes and the air turns thick and sound disappears. You curl in tight and rock, rock, rock, and you grip your hands over your ears and dig your chin into your chest and whisper brave, brave, brave)